

# Introduction

For more than thirteen years, the Travis County Health and Human Services & Veterans Service Department has contracted with community-based organizations to meet the critical needs of local residents. Community-based organizations are frequently geographically and culturally embedded in the communities they serve, and are often best positioned to provide needed services.

This report examines a limited set (46) of the Department's purchased social service investments, and covers the 2008 contractual period. Over the next several years, this report will expand to include all of the Department's contracted and internal social service programs.<sup>2</sup> Appendix A lists other programs that this report may eventually include.

These investments are critical components of the Department's strategy to optimize self-sufficiency for families and individuals in safe and healthy communities.

## Purpose of Report

This report is intended to contribute to local knowledge about some of the Department's key contracted community-based programs. Toward this end, the report addresses the following questions:

- What issue areas do the programs support?
- What community conditions do the programs address and what changes in community conditions may impact the programs?
- What is the Department's investment in the programs?
- What do the programs strive to achieve and what services do they provide?
- Who are the programs intended to serve and who do they serve?
- Where do clients reside and where do they go to receive services?
- How have the programs performed?

This information will provide a foundation for policy makers, program managers, and others to better understand these investments, recognize and celebrate accomplishments, spot areas for improvement, disseminate lessons learned, and identify areas warranting further research.

When reviewing the information presented in this report, it is important to keep in mind the considerations cited at the Executive Summary's conclusion. Please also refer to Appendix B for further description of the report's data sources.

Readers should also consider this report in conjunction with other local analyses and reports in order to obtain a more complete picture of the community. The *Travis County Snapshot from American Community Survey 2007*, in particular, provides complementary contextual information around current demographics and local conditions.<sup>3</sup>

## Community Conditions: Overarching Information

Most social service programs described in this report serve Travis County residents who are in or near poverty. Some programs, though, do assist vulnerable populations, such as those experiencing abuse and neglect, irrespective of their income level. The recent economic trends and, in particular, the current economic recession elevates the need for these services for Travis County residents:

- The median income, once adjusted for inflation, fell 7% from \$56,730 in 2002 to \$52,937 in 2007;<sup>4</sup>
- The unemployment rate totaled 3.9% in January 2008 but rose to 6.1% by January 2009<sup>5</sup> and is projected to rise further in 2009;<sup>6</sup>
- Nearly one in five residents (19.3%) lack health insurance and the number may grow if unemployment and underemployment rates continue to rise;<sup>7</sup>
- Foreclosure rates rose 33% from approximately 3,500 in 2007 to nearly 5,000 in 2008;<sup>8</sup>
- The cost of basic essentials such as food increased significantly over the past year<sup>9</sup> and, while the price of gas has recently dropped to extremely low prices, it rose to unprecedented levels during this time;<sup>10</sup> and
- Natural disasters – such as Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike – have unexpectedly tapped into state and local resources in recent years.

These economic conditions are expected to continue to increase demand for social services. At the same time, however, resources are shrinking. Donations to some local nonprofit organizations have been falling.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, local, state, and federal revenue has declined.<sup>12</sup>

Local programs are also often significantly affected by changes in federal, state, and local policy and funding streams. In January 2009, a new federal administration took office, and the 81st Texas State Legislature will be in session through the spring of 2009. In the coming year, changes at the national and state level may be considerable. Deece Eckstein, Coordinator of Governmental Relations for Travis County, reported that local health and human service programs could benefit greatly from the federal stimulus bill that was passed on February 17, 2009.<sup>13</sup> The impact of these economic trends and related legislative initiatives are currently unknown but likely to be significant.

## Community Conditions: Interviews with Contracted Service Providers

In the spring of 2008, staff from Travis County Health and Human Services & Veterans Service (TCHHS/VS) visited several social service agencies contracted by TCHHS/VS.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of the site visits was to ensure that services purchased by TCHHS/VS remain relevant to current community needs and to understand, explain, and provide context to investments' performance results.

At these visits, TCHHS/VS staff interviewed agency representatives to gather programmatic and community information. Visits were typically conducted with the agency's Executive Director and key programmatic personnel. Interviews were semi-structured, using open-ended questions. Visiting TCHHS/VS staff members had programmatic expertise and were responsible for the programmatic component of agency contracts.

Information obtained through open-ended interviews is classified as qualitative data. Qualitative data "includes virtually any information that can be captured that is not numerical in nature."<sup>15</sup> The following qualitative information is intended to enrich readers' understanding of the underlying factors contributing to the quantitative results found in this report and of the larger community context in which these efforts occur. For example, underlying each agency's performance results are many factors, including client characteristics, funding changes, and staffing needs. Only through qualitative data can we better understand the factors contributing to agencies' performance results.

Some common themes emerged across agencies and issue areas.

- Economic conditions have **increased client needs and demands on service providers**. Increased referrals, workloads, and/or demand for services were seen by seven agencies. Two of these agencies, plus an additional two agencies, noted the impact of the changing economic climate on their clients. Examples included increased housing and transportation costs and a reduction in work hours.
- **A more diverse client population** was seen by six agencies. Three agencies saw increases in Spanish-speaking clients. The remaining three agencies noted client growth in ethnic minorities, African-Americans, or populations from various foreign countries. Two of these agencies also had challenges hiring and training bilingual staff, and one had difficulty with language barriers.
- **An increase in client mental health/substance abuse issues** was reported by four agencies. Of those, one agency also observed a lack of adequate resources in the community for families with a history of mental illness/substance abuse. Another agency noted challenges with mental health and drug and alcohol services in two of their programs.
- Three agencies reported that their **clients are moving out of Austin** toward Del Valle, Pflugerville, and other outlying areas of the county. This shift in geographic location, coupled with fluctuating gas prices, impacts clients' access to affordable transportation and increases the financial burden on service delivery systems (noted by five agencies).
- Two agencies observed **a lack of affordable child care in the community**, with one specifically noting the unmet needs of teen parents.

- **Changes in funding** impacted a number of agencies. Agencies noticed more upheaval in the funding environment, with three agencies noting changes in United Way funding strategies and/or continuum of care shifts, and another three (including one agency above) experiencing challenges with decreasing funding or changes in funding requirements.
- Finally, agencies reported **increased staff and facility needs**. Staff turnover was a challenge for two agencies, and three agencies required additional staff (including the two abovementioned agencies lacking bilingual staff). Facility capacity issues were felt by three agencies; one of these agencies and an additional agency also saw a rise in crime in surrounding areas.

## Organization of Report

This report addresses ten issue areas. Each section begins with summary information about the issue area, related community conditions, and programs covered within that issue area.

An issue area encompasses those programs with goals most aligned with the goals of that issue area. While each program is included in only *one* issue area, a program may promote the goals of *several* issue areas. For example, a workforce development program may primarily include work readiness services but also include a small educational program. The principal goals of the program promote the workforce development issue area goals, so the program is categorized in the workforce development issue area rather than the education issue area.

This report also provides detailed information about each program covered by an issue area, including an overview of program goals, principal services provided, participant eligibility criteria, funding, and client demographics. This report also captures each program's performance results compared to its contractual performance goals and explanations of notable variance (+/- 10%) between the performance results and goals.